

VZCZCXRO0495
RR RUEHMA
DE RUEHYD #1631/01 2990855
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 260855Z OCT 06
FM AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 6877
INFO RUEHUJA/AMEMBASSY ABUJA 1164
RUEHAR/AMEMBASSY ACCRA 0367
RUEHKE/AMEMBASSY KINSHASA 0788
RUEHLC/AMEMBASSY LIBREVILLE 1314
RUEHPC/AMEMBASSY LOME 0233
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1373
RUEHMA/AMEMBASSY MALABO 0097
RUEHNJ/AMEMBASSY NDJAMENA 1273
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1600
RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS 0355
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YAOUNDE 001631

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DEPT FOR AF/C
PARIS AND LONDON FOR AFRICA ACTION OFFICERS
EUCOM FOR J5-A AFRICA DIVISION AND POLAD YATES

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [CM](#) [EAGR](#) [SENV](#) [KCOR](#) [SCUL](#) [PINR](#)

SUBJECT: CAMEROON: OFF ROAD IN THE WESTERN PROVINCES

¶1. (U) Pol/Econ chief made a three-day trip at the height of the rainy season September 28-October 1 to inaugurate Self-Help and Ambassador's Girls Scholarship projects in the North West, South West and West provinces. This message offers her impressions of the region.

Initial Impressions of
western Cameroon

¶2. (U) The well-paved road from Yaounde to Bafoussam in Cameroon's West province winds its way through rolling hills and grassy plains. For those accustomed to the dodgy road that connects Yaounde with the commercial capital Douala, the smooth pavement, sturdy and wide shoulder and abundance of speed limit, road safety and directional signs, impresses one that the absence of these elsewhere in the country reflects a lack of will, not of ability.

¶3. (U) Soon after leaving the outskirts of Yaounde, one is struck by the prevalence of churches in every village. Throughout the western provinces massive structures, built primarily by the Baptists, Presbyterians and Lutherans abound, reflecting -- especially in anglophone North West and South West provinces -- the links with the United States, Canada and the UK. They stand in sharp contrast to the modest, even humble, dwellings of the villagers. Markedly less in number, but still noticeable, are the mosques and the Islamic primary and secondary schools.

Rare Earth

¶4. (U) On balance, the soil in Cameroon's western provinces is very fertile; in fact, most of the produce sold in Yaounde and Douala is grown in this region. (Note: There are a few areas, however, where the soil is poor and locals are limited in what they can grow, mostly to beans and corn. End Note) Roadside markets teem with bushels of fresh tomatoes, huge heads of cabbage, potatoes, carrots, green beans, corn and dried legumes, not to mention pineapples, plantains, bananas and oranges. The soil itself runs the gamut from Burnt Siena

to an almost merlot red, and, in places, a deep brown reminiscent of espresso roast coffee. The North West is also a rice growing region and the road north of Bamenda snakes through the grassy rice fields before climbing into the hills of Kumbo and Ndu.

15. (U) Food shopping in the provinces is a popular pastime for Yaounde and Douala residents, many of whom make regular trips back to their villages. (Note: "Village," in the Cameroonian sense of the word, refers to a region where people speak the same local dialect. Thousands of people might live in a "village." End Note) Not only is the produce fresher than what appears in the Yaounde and Douala markets days later, but it is also much less expensive. According to the National Institute of Statistics, 30 percent of the transportation costs to get food from the fields to the urban markets is attributable to "fees" paid to police at checkpoints along the way.

Snakes, Rats, Monkeys and other
roadside treats

16. (U) For those with more adventuresome palates, local hunters dot the roadside offering rats, snakes, monkeys and the more pedestrian goat for sale; at times fresh, or at least fresh killed. Bush meat is for some a choice, but for most, the only option. Though most (70%) of Cameroon's poultry farming is backyard, it is not sufficiently widespread to provide all families a source of protein, and there are some for whom the FCFA 2000 (about USD 4) price of a chicken is prohibitive. (Note: Raising cane rats is an important component of the revenue generating activities of

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"Serve the Orphans," an Ambassador's Girls Scholarship recipient in Ndu, NW Province. End Note)

"Repatriating Assets"

17. (U) Another striking feature of the western provinces is the abundance of enormous houses -- compounds in many cases -- built by those who have made their fortune in Yaounde or Douala, either in business or government, legitimately or not. A number of unfinished mansions appear to have been started by ministers or other officials who got kicked out of office before they could steal enough to complete construction. Far beyond large country houses, many of these mansions epitomize wretched excess, both in size and design. Moreover, many are nestled among very/very modest dwellings and a local villager confirmed the impression that this placement is often an "in your face" message to less successful neighbors.

Roads: The slime is ridiculous

18. (U) Though the roads connecting Bafoussam and Bamenda (the West and North West provincial capitals, respectively) are quite good (even though the roads within the cities are pretty bad), venturing off the main road, or into remote villages, is an adventure not for the faint of heart (or for anyone lacking a four-wheel drive vehicle), and one that should be avoided during the rainy season. Rural roads in the South West and North West provinces, at times partially paved, but mostly boasting impressive potholes, are so bad that they are controlled with "rain gates" to restrict vehicular traffic when it rains so as not to further degrade the road bed. Cars, trucks and busses still get through, however, and often with dramatic results and they slip, slide and (sometimes) flip on muddy slopes.

¶9. (U) The village of Alou in the South West province is one most Cameroonians avoid during the rainy season. The hilly dirt road, when embraced by seasonal rains, becomes a sea of thick, clay-like mud, with ruts of 8 to 12 inches. Sturdy, powerful all-wheel drive vehicles have trouble, and typical local conveyances have accidents. Bus and other passengers repeatedly have to unload, dig out and re-board.

Meeting the Fon

¶10. (U) Alou itself is a pleasant town with a newly constructed classroom in the elementary school. (Note: The classroom construction was financed by Self-Help funds. End Note) Visitors must make the obligatory call on the Fon (the traditional ruler; called Chief or Lamido elsewhere in the country). The Fon of Alou, only enthroned in January following the death of his father, is a medical student (dentistry) at the local university. Protocol dictates that subjects must keep their heads below the Fon's and the Fon can only be introduced to a visitor by an aide, making the whole experience much like that of Anna Lewellyn in her first call on the King of Siam.

¶11. (U) Outside the palace (a description that stretches the limit of one's imagination) conversation with the Fon is much more relaxed, and he eagerly showed visiting P/E Chief the (U.S.-funded) stand pipe for fresh water, the latrine (of which he is particularly proud), the community hall, and the small herd of goats which provides most of the palace's revenue. As a medical student the young Fon is eager to introduce good sanitation and hygiene standards to his Fondom; he is also keen to further his dental studies in the United States.

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